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ABSTRACT

Several studies have reported that older persons' decline in life satisfaction and younger persons' increase in negative stereotypes toward the aged seem to be connected to the societal trend of separation between the generations. To counteract this trend intergenerational programs are being developed nationwide that provide for frequent and meaningful contact between young and old. This paper reports on intergenerational programs in schools. Anecdotal reports from these programs suggest that relationships are developing between children and older volunteers which seem to affect children's learning as well as their attitudes toward older people, and older persons' feelings of self-worth. Information gathered informally from participants in the Senior Citizen School Volunteer Program, one of the Generations Together programs based at the University of Pittsburgh, support such findings. To obtain a clearer picture of intergenerational contact and attitudes, children's perception of the elderly and children's view on aging was investigated in a study involving 256 fourth, fifth, and sixth grade children. What children know about aging, how they feel about being old or growing old, and what their behavioral intentions are regarding older people were explored. The study also tested the effect of consistent social contact with elderly persons on children's attitudes toward old age. Results are discussed. (RH)

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The Impact of Intergenerational Programs on Children's Growth and on Older Persons' Life Satisfaction

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"Innovations Within Educational Gerontology"

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At a time in our history when our country is beset with stress, it is encouraging to have an opportunity to share some ideas related to a growing national effort to make some new supportive connections between two major groups of Americans. There is currently in the United States a movement to increase intergenerational experiences between the young and old, experiences that foster cooperation, understanding, and friendship between the generations.

The historical validity of these intergenerational experiences is founded in the extended family which provided the context in which social learning, support, and nurturance passed from olders to youngers and from youngers to olders in an unending cycle. This unending cycle evolved within the extended family in which there was frequent and continuing interaction between the generations.

Within the last several decades we have seen a significant trend away from the extended family and the concomitant age-integrated society toward a nuclear family and age-segregated society. With the increasing prevalence of this nuclear family, opportunities for frequent interaction between young and old are diminishing. This trend which has resulted in fewer connections between the generations has an impact on attitudes of youth twoard aging and on older persons' feelings of life satisfaction.

Several studies in the 1960s have reported that older persons' decline in life satisfaction and younger persons' increase in negative sterotypes toward the aged and aging seem to be connected to the societal trend of separation between the generations. (Hickey, 1968; Seefeldt, 1977).

To counteract this trend intergenerational programs are being developed nationwide that provide for frequent and meaningful contact between young and old. These programs are designed to offset the decreasing opportunities

for youth and older persons within families to have consistent and frequent interaction. This paper will report on a specific type of intergenerational program and its impact on the young and old participants, namely integenerational programs in schools.

Intergenerational programs in the nation's schools involve a community's young and old sharing experiences that yield mutual trust, learning, and understanding. Currently these programs involve approximately 100,000 older persons and several million children. They are in evidence in urban, suburban, and rural schools, and involve a community's senior citizens as volunteers supporting the social, emotional and academic growth of the young. Older persons serve as non-judgmental, non-evaluative resource persons performing an array of tasks that enhance the growth of the young and bring a unique enrichment to the school environment. As tutors to reinforce basic skills, as role models demonstrating unique interests or hobbies, as confidants to help young people solve personal problems, or as initiators of special enrichment activities, older volunteers motivate learning and enhance children's growth while developing meaningful friendships.

Anecdotal reports from these programs throughout the United States suggest that relationships are developing between children and older volunteers which seem to affect children's learning as well as their attitudes toward older people, and older persons' feelings of self-worth. Exemplary of this are these comments from a child and a senior citizen volunteer.

> Child: "I like you coming to this school. You make me feel good inside. I like you and your work, especially the graphs. I really appreciate you coming and helping all of us in math. You make Mondays a great day. You are our special friend."
>
> Volunteer: "At 65 my life has new meaning. I wake each day full of enthusiasm and excitement knowing that I will be of some value to some child and to some teacher."

In an effort quantitatively to report the effect of these programs on children and older persons, information is systematically being collected that describes their impact on both populations.

The data reported in this paper has been gathered by one representative intergenerational school program. In a series of studies carried out by this program the following questions were addressed:

- What is the effect on children's learning of the consistent presence of older volunteers in classrooms?
- What is the impact on children's views toward older persons of consistent interaction with older volunteers?
- What is the impact of the intergenerational programs on older persons' feelings of life satisfaction?

The program involved in compiling this information is the Senior Citizen School Volunteer Program (SCSVP)* which currently is developing intergenerational programs in schools in communities in Western Pennsylvania. Approximately 300 senior citizens, 350 teachers and 8,000 students in grades 1 - 12 are participating in this program that involves weekly interaction between the students and the senior citizens from the local community.

The SCSVP, which began in 1978, collects information each year on the program's impact. Through the use of questionnaires and logs, participating teachers report on the academic and social growth of students as it seems to relate to the presence of senior citizen volunteers. Similarly through the use of questionnaires, the volunteers report the impact of the school experience on their lives.

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* The SCSVP is one of the programs of Generations Together, a family of intergenerational programs based at the University of Pittsburgh.

Since the first reporting in June 1979 teachers have consistently observed a direct relationship between improved pupil performance and the presence of older volunteers. Typical of these reports is the following summary of the 1980-81 findings from 99 teacher logs and questionnaires. Of these teachers, 91% indicated that the senior citizen volunteer contributed to students' academic growth and 95% indicated that the volunteers contributed to pupils' social growth.

Teachers recorded that senior citizen volunteers worked in a variety of academic content areas, such as language arts, math, science and social studies, and as a result of their consistent support, there was significant pupil growth in comprehension, reading and math skills. Additionally, volunteers provided special enrichment in the classroom by supplementing the curriculum with activities related to their own hobbies, skills, and interest. Finally, the presence of the older volunteer seemed to effect the overall calssroom behavior with a majority of teachers indicating a significant reduction in discipline problems and a positive influence on the quality of learning the day the volunteer is present.

The 1980-81 summary from questionnaires answered by 65 senior citizen volunteers describes the impact of these intergenerational experiences on their lives. Of those reporting, 97% believed participation in the program improved their feelings of self-worth; 20% reported improved health that seemed to be related to their program involvement, and 25% said they learned new skills in the process of becoming effective resource persons to children. Finally, 90% of the senior citizen volunteers reported that the experience in school was a productive and rewarding use of their free time. This data from the 1980-81 logs and questionnaires is typical of that received for each year of the program's existence.

In addition to this quantitative reporting, spontaneous, informal discussions with volunteers yielded information that gives some further insight into the quality of the senior citizens' experiences. Many volunteers said they were having fun, that life was a challenge, that they now had a better relationship with their own grandchildren, and that they were enjoying learning again. Several of the couples involved in the program said they especially enjoyed their evenings together discussing "their kids at school."

As the SCSVP grew, program staff observed positive relationships developing between the students and the volunteers, and listened to many anecdotes describing the new connections being made between the generations in the communities involved in the program. Since earlier studies from other communities had described attitudes toward aging as predominantly negative, it seemed appropriate to examine the views on aging among a typical population of children in Western Pennsylvania.

From September 1979 to June 1980, 256 fourth, fifth, and sixth grade children from four public schools in Western Pennsylvania participated in a study to examine children's perception of the elderly and their view on aging. Three of the schools were in small towns with working and middle class predominantly white populations, and one was in an urban, working class, multi-racial community. 190 students in the study were participants in SCSVP.

The study was divided into two parts; the first part was designed to examine what children know about aging, how they feel about being old or growing old and what their behavioral intentions were regarding older people. For this first part of the study an original survey "Children's Views on

Aging" was used. The survey information on children's knowledge about aging showed that their knowledge was based on observation of physical changes. This was evidenced by their recognition of a decline in physical ability and their observation that physical difference accompanies this decline. Responding to questions like "What do you think happens when you get to be an old person?" and "How can you tell when people are growing old?", children typically described the physical characteristics they associate with this period of life, for example, "You have a cane," "You are wrinkled," "You move slower," "You are often ill." 62% of the responses suggested that children observed negative physical characteristics.

On questions related to feelings about the aging process, e.g., "How do you feel about growing old?, How do you think it feels being old?", 27% of the children responded that being old has negative characteristics, such as feeling lonely, helpless, and unwanted. To the question "What do you think you will be like when you are old," however, 76% of the responses had positive characteristics, such as "It will be fun," "I will have lots of time," and "It will be wonderful."

On questions related to children's behavioral intentions toward older people, answers were grouped according to their willingness to interact in the classroom with an old person. The results of these answers are summarized in the following chart.

Question Asked	% of children who responded "Yes"
1. Would you like to have an old person in your classroom?	77%
2. Would you go to an old person if you had a problem.	63%
3. Would you provide help if the older person has a problem	30%

The second part of this study tested the effect of consistent social contact with elderly persons on children's attitudes toward old age. Examined were (1) whether children with consistent weekly contact with older volunteers would express a more positive attitude toward the elderly than children without contact and (2) whether children completing the second year of contact with senior citizen volunteers would have more positive attitudes than those completing year one.

The participants in the study were divided into three groups:-

Group 1 - students involved in SCSVP for 1 year

Group 2 - students involved in SCSVP for 2 years

Group 3 - the comparison group, or students not involved in the program.

For this part of the study a measure of change in attitude as a function of contact with the elderly was determined by a change in scores on two attitude tests administered 8 months apart.

The results revealed positive change scores for groups 1 and 2 (SCSVP participants) that were significantly greater than the change scores for the group 3 (the comparison group). It may, therefore, be concluded that students with one or two years of contact with elderly persons in their classroom have demonstrated a more positive increase in their attitudes toward the elderly than the pupils without this contact. The attitudes of children involved in SCSVP for one year and for two years were then compared using a twelve scale semantic differential. On this scale, the attitudes of the group involved in the program for two years was significantly higher than the group involved for one year.

In reviewing the combined results from both the systematic data collection reported by SCSVP and from the attitude study, it is clear

that the consistent interaction between young and old in these intergenerational school programs can and does impact on older persons' feelings of life satisfaction and on children's growth, learning, and attitudes toward the elderly. The programmatic implications from these findings are equally clear if the results are assumed to be generalizable to other communities: efforts should be made for systematic nationwide expansion of intergenerational programs in schools.

Finally, we can anticipate that, through these programs, the development of new relationships between the generations can be established, there will be a decline of negative myths and stereotypes about aging and the elderly, and about youth, and schools can create experiences that testify to the continuity of life by providing connections between the young and old.

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